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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001100

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [AM](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ARMENIAN BISHOP DISCUSSES CHALLENGES FOR
ETHNIC ARMENIANS

REF: A. YEREVAN 0314
[1](#)B. TBILISI 0770
[1](#)C. TBILISI 0538

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

(C) Summary: The Ambassador met with Bishop Vazgen Mirzakhanian, Primate of the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church Diocese in Georgia (AAC) May 20, as a follow-up to his meeting on regional issues with Shavarsh Kocharian, Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, and His Holiness Karekin II, the head of the Catholicos of All Armenians, in Yerevan with Ambassador Yovanovich (Ref A). Bishop Mirzakhanian cited the Millennium Challenge Corporation road improvements, and the GoG increase in budgetary support to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region as major positive step for his community. The Bishop highlighted three major unresolved issues of importance to ethnic Armenian Georgians: the ability to use Armenian as an official language at local levels, educational opportunities for ethnic Armenians, and the return of disputed church properties. We will raise these issue with Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili, who is the government point person on these issues. End Summary.

Language Barriers

[1](#)2. (C) The number one concern of ethnic Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti remains recognition of Armenian as a regional language (Ref B). Mirzakhanian said that if even "unofficial" recognition of the Armenian language would be helpful. He noted that in practice all local business is conducted in Armenian, however, local residents who can not speak Georgian are at an extreme disadvantage and are unable to use government structures, such as courts to carry out legal proceedings. Mirzakhanian said that even if Armenian was not granted the status of an official language, then simultaneous translation in Armenian should be provided as a basic accommodation during court and other official administrative proceedings.

Education Challenges

[1](#)3. (C) Mirzakhanian said that education in the region remained at a basic level which did not yield economic growth or support the integration of ethnic Armenian citizens in wider Georgian culture. He proposed a joint Armenian-Georgian University in Akhalkalaki which would raise Georgian language skills in the region and provide advanced education to help ethnic Armenians be more competitive for mid and upper level jobs in the Georgian economy. Currently, 200 students every year leave the region for education in Armenia, and do not return. The Georgian Ministry of Education has expressed a willingness to dedicate resources to a bilingual educational program (as does the Government of Armenia), but after three years there has not been tangible progress on this issue. As a result, ethnic Armenians are sending their children abroad to Armenian or Russian language institutes of higher education. The lack of local higher education institutions limits the intellectual community in the region largely to teachers of elementary schools.

Return of Armenian Churches

¶4. (C) Mirzakhanian said that unless the law is changed to permit formal recognition of religious faiths (ref C) other than the Georgian Orthodox Church, he expected that there would be little progress on the return of historical churches to their original pre-Soviet congregations. Although Mirzakhanian had expected the law to have been amended in March allowing the AAC, Roman Catholics, Jews, and Muslims to register as official religions, the law has not yet been amended. Despite earlier indications to the AAC that Temur Yakobashvili, Minister of Reintegration, was working an amendment to the civil law, Mirzakhanian said that he has checked with Parliamentary officials who have confirmed that they had no new drafts law pending on the issue, nor were aware of any proposed changes to the current law. The Ambassador undertook to raise this issue with Yakobashvili during their next meeting. By Mirzakhanian's count, seven churches in Tbilisi are Armenian in origin, as well as 300 others throughout Georgia. The Ambassador mentioned that the GOC has said that it had a claim to a number of GOC origin churches located in Armenia. Mirzakhanian said that GOC officials have never officially lodged a complaint nor supplied a list of any disputed GOC churches in Armenia with the AAC. He said provisions of Armenian law existed which address competing claims on churches. Mirzakhanian said conversely, the AAC has provided the GOC with such information and made formal requests through appropriate channels.

Current Status of Legislation

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¶5. (C) Comment: In many areas, notably in infrastructure development, the GOG has shown a willingness to engage a previously largely-ignored Armenian minority. Nonetheless, the refusal to legally recognize faiths other than the GOC has long been a contentious issue. The Ministry for Reintegration prepared to present a new proposal to the cabinet in early April to resolve the issues of recognition of other religions formally as Entities of Public Law. However the deputy State Minister for Reintegration was advised not to present the proposal to the cabinet without consultation with the Patriarchy. Upon consultation, the Patriarchy advised that with protests taking place, times were too tense and the proposal should wait. We will continue to encourage all sides to work towards an equitable and mutually acceptable solution.
TEFFT